

# THE DIVORCE

by

Feng Xingyue & Liu Yuan

BFA, Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, 2013

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
in  
VISUAL ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2017

© Feng Xingyue & Liu Yuan, 2017

## **Acknowledgements**

To Henry Tsang, M. Simon Levin, Keith Wallace

For their inspiring conversations and guidance

To Katharine M.Y. Yi for her help and time

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Personal Voices: The Beginning of It All</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Marriage</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Marriage in China</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Personal Voices: Our Marriage Certificate</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Filial Piety</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Personal Voices: Emerging Conflict</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Wedding Commercialization</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Lucky Money</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Personal Voices: Turn It Into Art</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Artists</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The Divorce Project</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>The Exhibition at Plaza Projects</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Different Voices For Different Plans</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Personal Voices: After Project</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Work Cited</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>35</b>

## **Introduction**

This thesis is the work of our collaboration. Throughout the writing are narrations from both Feng Xingyue and Liu Yuan that tell the entire creative process of our work. These narrations work as a timeline and thread together our work and research.

We are collaborating artists and partners in life who have worked with each other for many years. China's social issues are our interest points. This article can be divided into three parts: the history of marriage, marriage in China and its problems, and our Divorce project, an art piece that includes a Chinese wedding ceremony.

## **Personal Voices: The Beginning of It All**

Feng Xingyue

When I was a child, I was always confused, why did my parents get married? They hated each other and suffered from their marriage since the moment I could remember. Throughout my childhood, I had to witness their constant fighting over the smallest things. I used to try to convince my mother to get divorced. As someone raised up in their unhappy relationship, my attitude on marriage has always been negative.

Liu Yuan

Unlike Feng's family, I have a happy, loving family. My parents seem to get along in their marriage, even though they were introduced by a 媒人<sup>1</sup> (mei ren). I didn't know anyone from older generations who weren't married. I didn't have a critical perspective on marriage, but I had never thought about committing to marriage either. I think I had no awareness on marriage.

### **Marriage**

Today, the majority of marriages in most countries and regions are based on monogamy, and only a few countries still retain polygamy. In ancient times, marriage originated to serve the function of asserting ownership of property, but after thousands of years of progression and refinement, modern day marriage seemingly conforms to the contemporary civilization. In Bertrand Russell's *Marriage and Morals*, he writes that, "In early agricultural and pastoral communities both wives and children were an economic asset to a man (p. 50)". Historically, marriage has gone through evolution many times in feudal societies. "With the coming of Christianity this outlook was changed. The part of religion in marriage was very greatly augmented, and infractions of the marriage law came to be blamed on grounds of taboo rather than of property ... Marriage became a sacrament and therefore lifelong (p. 51)". The constitution of current day marriage system and marital law are based on the distribution of property, sexuality and children's custody. Russell also states that,

"In quite modern times, that is to say, since about the period of the French

---

<sup>1</sup> 媒人 (mei ren), a role similar to that as a matchmaker, is someone who introduces single people to get married.

Revolution, an idea has grown up that marriage should be the outcome of romantic love. Most moderns, at any rate in English-speaking countries, take this for granted, and have no idea that not long ago it was a revolutionary innovation (p. 31)".

However, apart from its romantic connotations obtained from around the French Revolution, the modern day marriage system is nevertheless built on the foundation of asserting ownership.

Regarding the future of marriage, Chinese scholar Li Yinhe<sup>2</sup> has an interesting perspective. In the online forum 奇葩大会, *Qi Pa Da Hui*, she posted, *The Downfall of Marriage* (2016), predicting that in the near future, the marriage system will gradually weaken, even become extinct as a result of the liberation of human nature, the attainment of gender equality, and a reformed political system. Consequently, marriage will become an unpopular choice.

### **Marriage in China**

In ancient China, 成家立业<sup>3</sup> (cheng jia li ye) was considered to be a mandatory stage in life. Chinese scholar Chen Peng claims in *The History of Marriage in China* that, “中国婚姻基于天地阴阳自然之性，为人伦之本，家始于是，国始于是，社会之一切制度，莫不始于是。(16)”<sup>4</sup> Marriage was perceived as a fundamental, unalterable principle that conforms with nature.

---

<sup>2</sup> Li Yinhe (李银河) is a Chinese sociologist, sexologist, and activist for LGBT rights in China.

<sup>3</sup> 成家立业 (cheng jia li ye) is a Chinese expression which means starting a family and building a business. More generally, it means that man who gets married and is employed can provide his family a peaceful life.

<sup>4</sup> In Confucian philosophy, marriage is based on the nature of Yin and Yang. It is the essence of human ethics, the foundation of family, and the infrastructure of nation. It is the origin of all social systems (our trans).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China promulgated a marriage law that enforced monogamy, forbade concubinage as well as the buying and selling of women. Furthermore, for the first time, people were encouraged to choose their spouse themselves. However, before China's economic reform<sup>5</sup>, due to limited opportunities to socialize, very few were able to gain access to a genuine freedom of choice in love. As a result, many matchmaking agencies and specialists have emerged, along with people of all professions who played the role of matchmakers. People perceived matchmaking as a virtuous and beneficent activity. The tradition is continued and widely practiced today. In China's modern society, there are still many enthusiastic people keen on the act of matchmaking and helping single people meet and get married.

The Chinese government has consistently promoted marriage and the formation of families. According to the article, *The Family Planning Policy and Its Alterations* (2015), since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government played a guiding and administrative role in the personal and family life of its citizens. For example, during the period of the 大跃进<sup>6</sup> (Great Leap Forward), the government encouraged childbirth and the formation of large families. But since the late 1970s, the government implemented the 一孩政策<sup>7</sup> (One-Child Policy) to control the population growth. However, marriage has always been considered by the

---

<sup>5</sup> China's economic reform refers to the Reform and Opening-Up Policy. The strategic decision turned around China's insular situation from the world after 1949, and led China to a period of rapid economic development.

<sup>6</sup> 大跃进 (Great Leap Forward) is a nationwide political and economical movement launched in 1958. The purpose of the movement is to accelerate economic development; however, its consequence has faced many controversies.

<sup>7</sup> 一孩政策 (The One-Child Policy), under the Family Planning Policy, was a population planning policy of China. It was introduced in 1979 and began to phase out in 2015. The policy allowed many exceptions and gave exemptions to Chinese ethnic minorities. Until in 2015, the government revised the One-Child Policy into a Two-Child Policy (p. 1-3, p. 12).

government as an indispensable part to consolidate social stability. For instance, exemplary couples and families were chosen and advertised through media as role models for Chinese nationals to learn and emulate. Moreover, the military and large state-owned enterprises have employees working exclusively on matchmaking. Although policies on birth and population planning have developed significantly over the years, the encouragement of marriage and the formation of families remain static. China's dominating authoritarianism has resulted in the lack of freedom to practice diverse forms of relationship, such as common law and open relationship. Moreover, the Chinese government does not acknowledge alternative sexual orientations.

Additionally, heterosexuality is the only kind of relationship that is encouraged and acknowledged in China. Homosexuality and transsexuality are viewed as perverted. Queer rights are neglected; the queer community may be inhumanely treated. Li also has a theory that analyzes Chinese people's reaction to minority groups, in *Selected Writing of Li Yinhe*,

“我提出的中国人的“大概率价值观”<sup>8</sup> (“Large probability values”) 则是指这样一种文化心理，它认为凡是大概率（行为）就是可取的、正常的、值得赞扬的；凡是小概率事件（行为）就是不可取的、病态的、应受谴责的。(Chapter 2) 总之，大概率价值观只是一种以文化形式表现出来的农业社会特征，它是农业社会无选择余地的生活环境的产物。(Chapter 4)<sup>9</sup>”

---

<sup>8</sup> “大概率价值观” which literally translates into “Large probability values”, is from Li Yinhe(李银河)'s research that in China, the majority of Chinese population has uniformed behavior and attitudes. The vast majority of participants makes the same selection from most of the surveys conducted.

<sup>9</sup> My theory of Chinese people's 'large probability value' refers to the cultural psychology, where the most probable events (or behaviors) are advisable, normal, and praiseworthy. On the other hand, small probability events (or behaviors) are inadvisable, abnormal and blameworthy (Chapter 2). All in all, the “large probability value” is only a characteristic of agricultural society embodied as a cultural



The insufficiencies of the pension system is another reason that Chinese people feel pressured to get married. The pension system was established relatively recently, resulting in a disparity between urban and rural areas. To elaborate, compared with employees at state-owned enterprises, self-employed individuals and peasants have severely underdeveloped pension plans. Furthermore, employees at state-owned enterprises who have access to pension plans make up only 31% of the nation's population (Jackson, 2009). Given the lack of awareness and faith in the pension system, most seniors still depend on their children and the healthier spouse for their health care and daily support. Consequently, compared to the cities, the marriage rate is higher in rural regions, not to mention a tendency to marry younger as well.

In the past, one must be married before giving birth in order for legal documentations – 户口本<sup>10</sup> (Hu Kou) to be issued for their children; such identifications are essential for participating in social activities later in life. Although in modern day China, Hu Kou is easier to get, people are still morally condemned for having children without marriage. The Hu Kou system also has an impact on marriage, it legalizes the power parents have over their children's marriage. The Hu Kou booklet is a required document for completing marriage registration procedures, but the head of the household is almost always the person to keep the document. For this reason, to attain freedom in marriage, moral and political changes must occur in the conventional family relation.

---

form, an outcome of an agricultural social environment where alternative choices are non-existent (Chapter 4) (our trans).

<sup>10</sup> 户口本 (Hu Kou) is a household registration document in the People's Republic of China. It manages and records the population in units of households. By law, the Hu Kou booklet is a valid identity document that can be used in the same way as the Chinese Identity Card.

Sex is another factor of Chinese people to choose marriage. Up until recently, sex within marriage has been the only morally accepted form of intercourse. Premarital sex has always been subjected to moral criticism in the past and which has softened only over the last two decades. Also, prostitution is illegal in China. That being the case, marriage is still the safest option for the majority of people to meet their sexual needs. On the relation of sex and authority, Michel Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, “On the one hand, the theory would justify its authoritarian and constraining influence by postulating that all sexuality must be subject to the law; more precisely, that sexuality owes its very definition to the action of the law: not only will you submit your sexuality to the law, but you will have no sexuality except by subjecting yourself to the law (p. 128)”.

### **Personal Voices: Our Marriage Certificate**

Liu Yuan

In 2014, my mother asked Feng and me to get married before we came to Canada in pursuit of our master's degree. My mother is a kind person, and she adores Feng, so she brought that up as a nice gesture, at the same time in hopes that it could bring Feng's family peace of mind. I understood both my mother's concern and Feng's situation of having to face the pressure from her family. So I compromised and got our marriage certificate. It seemed that I didn't go against my parents' will. More importantly, I thought the certificate was just a piece of paper; it could not affect our relationship in any way. Plus, I had no assets or children so I was confident that I would never have to deal with the marriage law. We claimed our marriage certificate for the sake of our

parents in order to prevent any further conflicts. I thought getting the marriage certificate wouldn't have a huge effect on us since we would be spending our life in Canada, not China.

Feng Xingyue

In 2014, we decided to continue our studies in Canada. Before we went abroad, unbeknownst to my mother, we had already been living together for three years. It was difficult and frustrating to hide the fact from my mother throughout the years. When I told my mother that Liu and I would be living together in Canada, she immediately objected. In my mother's mind, cohabitating was unacceptable and shameful unless we were married. I knew her personality well. I was not hopeful in changing her mind. Funny enough, my mother couldn't stand Liu. She thought Liu loved art more than he loved me. She warned me tirelessly that we would not be happy together. Yet, instead of going against conventional morality, she would rather her daughter take the risk and be bounded with someone who she believed incapable of bringing me happiness. I was eager to escape from the shackles of my family, so I compromised and got the marriage certificate.

### **Filial Piety**

An important notion from Confucian philosophy which has been a major influence on the shaping of Chinese culture is the concept of Filial Piety, which is the continuation of the family line, 孟子<sup>11</sup> (Mencius) wrote, "There are three things which

---

<sup>11</sup> 孟子 (Mencius) (372 - 289 BC) was a great thinker, philosopher, and a key figure in Confucianism from the Warring State.

are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them (Chapter 26).” It is considered unfilial if a couple fails to give birth to a boy, which assumes that a marriage precedes the birth, meaning marriage is filial whereas choosing not to marry is unfilial. According to Peng Lin and Huang Pumin (2005), “三纲五常，臣事君，子事父，妻事夫，三者顺，天下治；三者逆，天下乱。(p. 217)<sup>12</sup>” These three fundamental bonds reflect totalitarianism, paternity and patriarchy in traditional Chinese thinking, as well as constructed the central Chinese social and familial power structure. Han Feizi’s view as an origin of Chinese moral ethics has influenced Chinese people until this day.

Filial piety in China demands that children must obey their parents. Parents feel they are responsible for finding the ideal spouse for their children. In return, children need to carry on the family lineage. It is a process where both parents and children are equally responsible to each other. These responsibilities result in the parents’ excessive involvement in their children’s marriage. Marriage represents the unification of two families rather than two individuals.

个人问题<sup>13</sup> (“Personal Issue”) is a prevalent expression from China’s previous generations. Although the term in a western context may point to the personal and private matters of an individual, in Chinese it strictly refers to marriage, a personal matter that nevertheless can be freely and publicly discussed. People are always enthusiastic to find out and talk about each other’s marital status. For instance, in the workplace, the superior would demonstrate their attentiveness to their subordinate

---

<sup>12</sup> In the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues, Chinese Legalist Han Feizi writes: court officials should serve their emperor, children should serve their parents, wives should serve their husbands; When the rules are followed, the world will be well managed; otherwise, the world will be ruined (our trans).

<sup>13</sup> 个人问题 literally translates into “Personal Issue.”

by asking about their “Personal Issue,” just as an elder would do the same out of caring for the young. They would also urge the single individual to resolve their “Personal Issue” without further delay. This convention lives on in today’s society. However, it has become one of the most frustrating problems for the younger generation, resulting in 催婚<sup>14</sup> (cui hun), a prominent cause for young people to flee from their family.

### **Personal Voices: Emerging Conflict**

Liu Yuan

In the summer of 2016, before we went back to China for our summer vacation, my mother started to plan for our wedding. It was that moment when I realized its seriousness. I had already felt confined by the marriage certificate. I resisted the idea of having a wedding—more specifically, a Chinese wedding. When I was in my undergraduate program, I had to attend five to six weddings every time I went back home. What is more, most of them are of couples I did not know. Sometimes I felt those occasions were free lunch opportunities, other times they were like a daily task to complete. Most of the weddings I attended made me feel uncomfortable, awkward, and tortured. More importantly, compared to a marriage certificate, the idea of marriage is much more intensely embodied and represented by the ceremony. Perhaps it’s because of the sense of ritual from giving wedding vows and receiving blessings. They are much more direct on pointing out the characteristics of marriage than a piece of paper. That is the point when I

---

<sup>14</sup> 催婚 (cui hun) is an expression for urging someone to get married.

realized I must not make any further compromises.

Feng Xingyue

I would often receive text messages from my high school classmates with attachments to their wedding invitations, but I choose to ignore most of them. I do not like attending social events, and weddings are just worse. I have only attended two weddings; both of them were my best friends'. I think most weddings are about the same. I would feel embarrassed for the newlyweds on the stage just by watching them from my table. There's no chance I would let myself stand on that stage. My mother, however, hoped that I would have a grand wedding, but for me, it's an impossible mission. Still, I know my mother wouldn't let it pass if her daughter marries without a magnificent wedding ceremony. It became an unresolvable conflict.

### **Wedding Commercialization**

In China, the changes in marriage are closely related to the nation's economic development. China's economic reform has the highest economic growth rate in the world for the past years, which in turn gave rise to the country's first group of nouveau riche. In the process of the economic development, compared to the rapid growth of wealth in the Chinese population, what is more concerning is the increase in wealth inequality. According to the *People's Livelihood Development Report of China*, China's Gini coefficient<sup>15</sup> has reached 0.73 in recent years. As Li Yinhe

---

<sup>15</sup> Gini coefficient is a common standard for analyzing income inequality, ranging from 0 to 1, meaning the smaller the value the more equitable. United Nations Development Program defines a Gini coefficient of 0.4 as a warning level of inequality.

demonstrates in her investigation on a Chinese village in *Selected Writing of Li Yinhe*,

“所有的男青年都要结婚，把积蓄的大部分用在婚姻大事上，在这一点上毫无例外。但是有人能请三十桌客，有人只能请二十桌，于是产生了自豪感，也产生了羞愧感。(156)”<sup>16</sup>

This phenomenon exists in several other aspects of China but is particularly evident in weddings, an occasion where all participants can meet their distinctive needs. The rich flaunt their success and wealth on the special day, while the poor would spend beyond their means to look impressive. Chinese people's 面子<sup>17</sup> (mian zi) problem has resulted in the shocking amount of money spent on weddings, with expenses often going over millions of Chinese Yuan. Weddings have evolved into a giant competition. Everyone hopes to induce envy and jealousy on their wedding day. The wedding has become, as Guy Debord writes in the *Society of the Spectacle*:

“not something added to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations—news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model

---

<sup>16</sup> Every young man has to get married, so they spend almost their entire savings on their wedding. There is no exception on this point. However, some were able to invite three hundred guests to their ceremony, while others could only afford to have two hundred guests. The disparities create a sense of pride as well as a sense of shame (our trans).

<sup>17</sup> 面子 (mian zi), or face, is a concept in interpersonal relations that's taken very seriously in China. It essentially stands for the granted respect each and everyone has in the society. Not giving mian zi to another indicates that you disrespect them, and may provoke the other to revenge upon it. A person that has mian zi is generally seen as someone with a high social status, someone well respected and reputable.

of social life. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. (p. 5)".

### **Lucky Money**

The prevailing model of marriage customs includes a significant amount of 聘礼<sup>18</sup> (Bride price), 闹洞房<sup>19</sup> (nao dong fang), and the increasing amount of lucky money. Lucky money, or red envelope, is a traditional custom in Chinese weddings where guests gift the newlywed with money in red envelopes as a symbol of good wishes. Chinese people were poverty-stricken in the past. Lucky money originated as support given by family and friends of the new couple on their wedding and their newly started life. As China's economy grows, new couples no longer need the money to start their marriage lives. The function of lucky money has been changed, and the amount of lucky money has increased accordingly, gradually becoming a form of contest between the givers. Our work *Lucky Money* (2016) (see fig. 1-2) focus on this particular Chinese social subject. The amount of lucky money to gift is flexible; currently, the average acceptable amount ranges from hundreds to thousands of Chinese Yuan which has become an increasingly significant financial burden to young people.

---

<sup>18</sup> 聘礼 (Bride price) is money, property, or other forms of wealth given to the bride and her family from the groom and his family.

<sup>19</sup> 闹洞房 (nao dong fang) is the series of activities after the wedding ceremony where guests prank and play risqué games with the bride and groom in their new bedroom.





Figure 1. Liu, Yuan & Feng, Xingyue. *Lucky Money*. Video. 2016. Emily Carr University: Concourse Gallery.



Figure 2. Liu, Yuan & Feng, Xingyue. *Lucky Money*. Video. 2016. Emily Carr University: Concourse Gallery.

The work is a nine-channel video installation of assorted visual effects. The video was shot at our friend's wedding. It records a boisterous scene where the reception table bustles with guests putting down lucky money for the newlyweds. Sometimes all nine channels align and form a single image, making one visual effect, including vertical flips, the kaleidoscope effect, close up and zooming in and out. At other times, each channel plays a single image or a different visual effect on its own. The audio track is a remix of electronic music samples. The rhythm and beats of the audio and visual components of the work are synchronized.

For the marrying couple, their wedding perhaps is a special, spectacular and sacred<sup>20</sup> occasion. On the contrary, we consider this work as a reflection on everyday life. For most people, having to attend weddings frequently becomes a regular activity and expense. Many of the newlyweds in those weddings are merely acquaintances, while the majority of wedding ceremonies are identical. For the attendees, going to weddings becomes a routine, an obligation and a wearisome part of everyday life.

### **Personal Voices: Turn It Into Art**

Liu Yuan

Last summer, before we went back to China, there was a lot of work to do for our graduate studies. We were under a lot of pressure. Meanwhile, my mother called me frequently to confirm the wedding date. I felt very annoyed. The

---

<sup>20</sup> Sacred in Chinese is 神圣. In China, marriage and wedding are believed to be sacred by Chinese people. The term does not have a strict religious reference. It is often used to describe marriage and weddings.

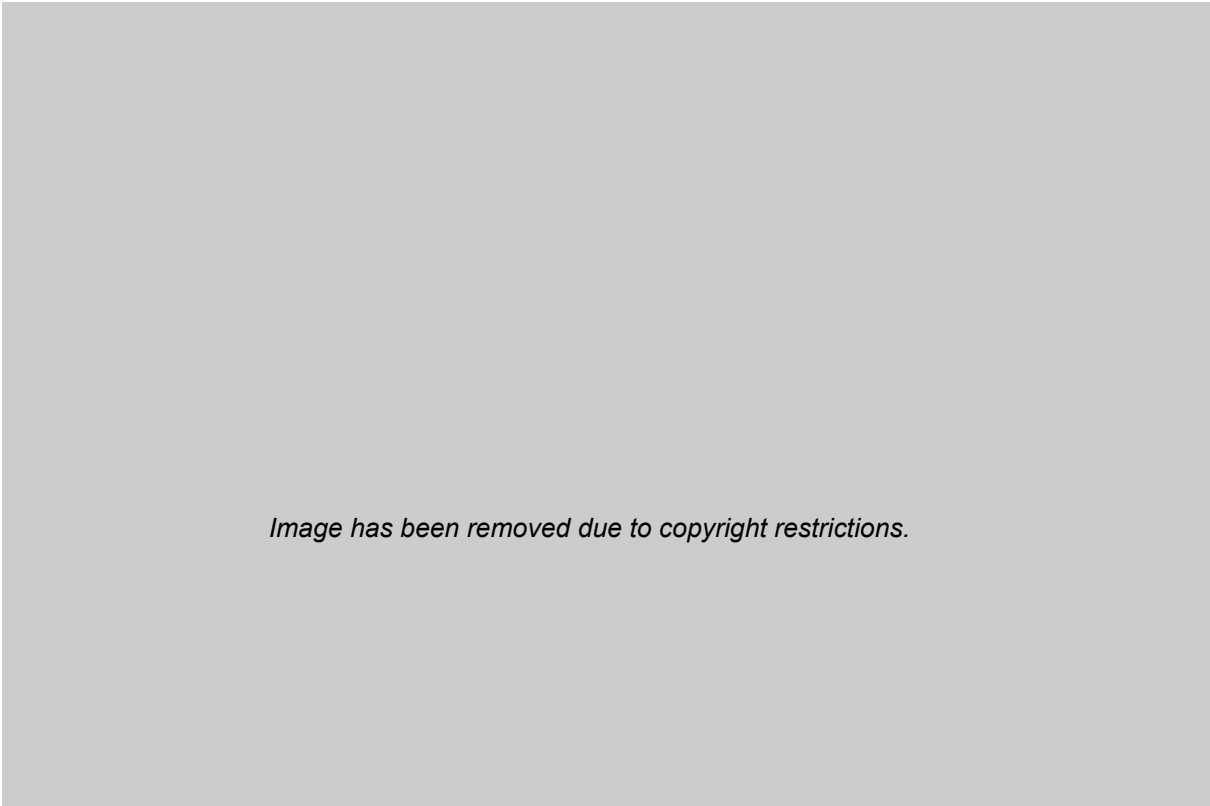
truth was, Feng and I had been having ongoing discussions on breaking up. It was a difficult situation. I didn't want to tell my mother about our quarrels before we could figure out a reasonable solution for our problem. Marriage became a burden in our relationship. However, this conflict is what made me start to rethink our relationship and to connect weddings to divorce. Also, the research we did for *Lucky Money* provided me with deeper reflections and knowledge on marriage. I finally told Feng about how I hoped to take this opportunity and turn it into our artwork. After talking it over, we decided to get divorced before our wedding.

#### Feng Xingyue

In the summer of 2016, it was the end of the term, and summer vacation was just around the corner. Pressure from various aspects of life had made me very emotional. I had huge fights with Liu constantly. At the time, I truly wanted to break up. However, whenever Liu facetimed his mother, I had to conceal my emotion, pretend to be all right, and join their conversation because I didn't want to make her feel disappointed. Just when I thought we were getting nowhere, Liu told me about his idea. I agreed that marriage was an obstacle in our relationship. We had a serious talk about this proposal, and agreed that this action could be seen as a gesture and protest against the conventional institution of marriage. Although this action is transgressive, both of us were excited by it. After a period of discussion and research, our relationship improved, and we stopped fighting.

## Artists

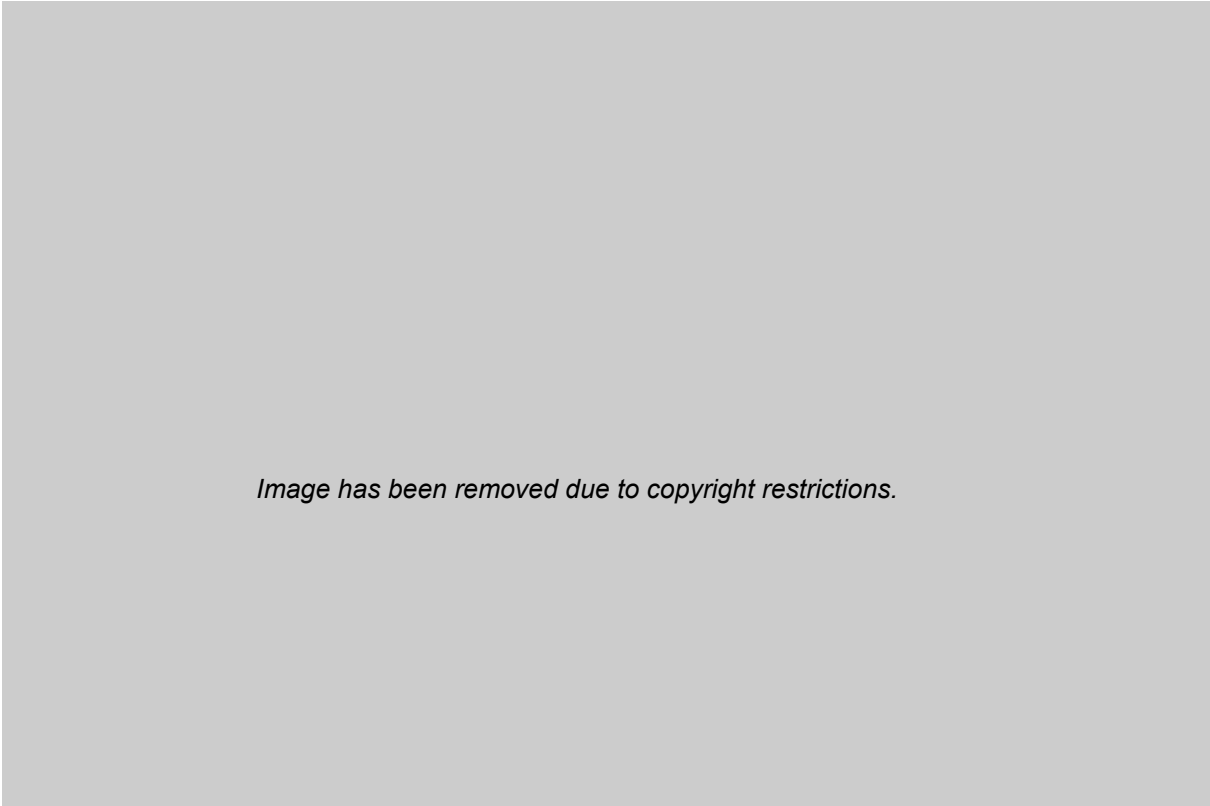
Ai Weiwei's practice often focuses on China's sociopolitical issues, and playing with the Chinese political power system. In 2012, he was accused of tax evasion by the government and faced a 15 million Chinese Yuan penalty. He responded by turning the crisis into an art project, where he borrowed money through social media from people who supported this project (see fig. 3). Everyone who has contributed to Ai became his creditor and in return receives a receipt designed and signed by Ai personally. The penalty from the government is countered by the support from tens of thousands of Chinese Netizens to create an ironic commentary. Ai successfully transform his personal crisis into an influential but also controversial work of art. Similarly, in the *Divorce* project, the process of getting the divorce certificate also exposed how China's political power system operates.



*Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.*

Figure 3. Ai Weiwei. *Loan*. 2011.

The artist that influences us in presentation format is Li Liao. Li is an emerging artist from China who primarily works in performance and conceptual art. His solo exhibition, *Art is Vacuum* (see fig. 4) presented a series of works related to his personal life. The first part of the project is associated with his artist identity and his father-in-law. The other part of this project includes a video and a number of audios that documented Li teaching the phrase “art is vacuum” to his daughter as her first words over the two years after she was born. Li’s work is an excellent example of art as life intervention. Furthermore, Li has challenged the conventional morals by disclosing parenting, a private and intimate activity, to the public. In some ways, Li treated his daughter as a medium for art.



*Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.*

Figure 4. Li Liao *Art is Vacuum*. 2016.

Tehching Hsieh's practice stimulates us to rethink the relationship between art and life. His five *One Year Performances* includes the *Cage Piece* where he lived in a cage for one year; the *Outdoor Piece* where he spent a year outside, and the *No Art Piece* where he disassociated himself with art for a year. These works are both his direct and indirect responses to life. For example, for his work *Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999* (Thirteen Year Plan, see fig. 8), he left his New York studio for thirteen years. During the time, Hsieh made artworks but never published them. This is the last work from the artist to this day. When the work ended, he finished the work with a collage with letters that formed the words "I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec 31, 1999" (Hsieh, 2000). Then, he announced to cease art-making. In his words, Hsieh said to the Guardian, "I don't do art anymore. I no longer feel creative. I don't want to do what the art world expects me to do. This is my exit. This is my freedom." In fact,

the *Thirteen Year Plan* was not only an exit to Hsieh. Through this project, he arrives at another stage of his life, something we also anticipate to achieve through our *Divorce* project.



Figure 8. Tehching Hsieh. *Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999*. 1999.

### **The Divorce Project**

The *Divorce* project can be summarized into one sentence – we got divorced secretly before the wedding. In 2014 we got our marriage certificates without having a wedding ceremony. In 2016, we got divorced and then had the wedding ceremony.

The *Divorce* project is a slice taken from our lives, using the medium of art to challenge the conventions and institutions of marriage and divorce.

Divorce has been the privilege of men until in recent histories. The new marriage law in modern China stipulates that women have the right to initiate divorce actions. Although both sexes now have the right to divorce, it is still considered as an act of misfortune. Divorced women are stereotyped and faulted as individuals who are problematic and have issues. Nonetheless, the rate of divorce is rising, especially in the younger generation living in major cities. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, more than 3.8 million couples registered for divorce in 2015, tripling since 2002. The city with the highest divorce rate is Beijing, reaching over thirty-nine percent. This data indicates that divorce has become a relatively common phenomenon in major cities. However, divorced women are still negatively labeled as re-married women, bringing them even more difficulties in finding another partner.

The action of secretly divorcing before the wedding is a gesture that counters conventional social morality that puts both our families to shame. However, since they do not know about our divorce, they still see us as their filial children. Conversely, if they found out about our divorce, they would very likely see us as violating the filial piety and moral code. It is highly possible that they will become furious and heartbroken.

Although stirring up conflicts in our families is not our intention, we are in fact deliberately opposing the current prevailing social norms as our demonstration to overturn the dominance of marriage and to dispel other institutional systems.



## **The Exhibition at Plaza Projects**

The chosen exhibition location, Plaza Projects, is located in Aberdeen Square, a typical Chinese shopping mall in Richmond, a suburb of Greater Vancouver. Greater Vancouver boasts the largest Chinese population in Canada, with one-fifth of its residents of Chinese heritage. Moreover, the suburb of Richmond has the most dynamic and the largest Chinese ethnic community in Greater Vancouver. According to the *National Household Survey* in 2011, the Chinese have become the largest ethnic group in Richmond, forming over half of its population. Richmond is appealing to new Chinese immigrants, because it bears a closer resemblance to modern China in both cultural and social aspects.

Aberdeen Square is a modern shopping center with wide-ranging types of businesses and restaurants. It is situated in a convenient location easily accessible by public transport. The owner and developer of the building is a Chinese corporation, and almost all of the store owners and clients are Chinese. By situating our exhibition in this environment, we could reach audiences from the Chinese community with the cultural background and capacity to understand the context of our work.

In China, many Chinese people have weddings in fancy restaurants, some of which take up an entire building, while others occupy multiple floors of a building. The restaurant where we held our actual wedding in China is an example of a multi-functional large complex “monstrous” restaurant that provides one-stop service for weddings.

In Vancouver, it is also a common practice to host weddings in restaurants. Shopping malls usually include restaurants, so when the audience sees the exhibition, there is potential for them to assume this is a real wedding.

The form of the artwork was a re-creation of a wedding banquet (see fig. 5-7). The exhibition was divided into two parts: a wedding ceremony and divorce. The wedding section re-created a wedding banquet scene that included a video of a wedding ceremony, and the divorce section presented the process of applying for the divorce certificate. At the entrance of the exhibition was a typically decorated wedding reception table. The reception provided red envelopes for the guests who were invited to give lucky money, and a guest book for them to sign. A large banner from the actual wedding ceremony of the artists with information such as the names of the bride and groom and the wedding date hung behind the table. Passing through reception, the audience enters the wedding section. This section occupied more than half of the entire exhibition space. This portion of the exhibition was transformed into a typical Chinese wedding banquet. In the center of the space was a large round banquet table eight feet in diameter with ten seats. On the table were six red wedding plates that offered guests typical and common refreshments found at Chinese weddings: peanuts, sunflower seeds, mandarin oranges and candy. There were also beverages and alcohol placed in the center of the table. The table faced a stage where a video projection played on a white background surrounded by wedding-themed decorations. The projection was a film produced by the wedding planning company. The content of the film was an edited compilation of scenes from wedding video of Feng Xingyue and Liu Yuan with a happy and joyful mood. Decorative red sheer chiffon dangled from the ceiling and two concrete pillars on

each side of the stage were wrapped in golden fabric, a color that symbolized prosperity and fortune in Chinese culture. In addition, the space was decorated with many commonly used props, such as pink balloons, red double happiness stickers, and fake flower petals.

On the other side of the wedding was the divorce section of the exhibition. In contrast, this space was set up as a museum display without any decorations. It was composed of three parts: a light box, a display case, and a projection of the divorce video. The light box emitted cold white light, on top of which were documents such as the receipt for the fees of our divorce procedures. The white display table with plexiglass cover was placed on the other side of the space. In it were the originals of our Hu Kou booklet, marriage certificates, divorce certificates, and train tickets. Between the light box and the display case was a projection of the divorce video. The video contained two parts: one of a counseling session with a marriage counselor, the other of the process of getting the divorce documents. The content of the video were secretly shot with hidden camera glasses. The video included both Chinese and English subtitles, as well as the date and time of when the video was recorded.

The interaction between the audience and the artwork began at the entrance of the exhibition, where the audience participated in signing the guestbook and giving lucky money at the reception table. In the wedding section of the exhibition, the audience was encouraged to sit around the table as they treat themselves to the refreshments and watch the wedding film. By the time they entered the divorce section, they would find that the story behind the wedding was a striking contrast from what they had presumed. The two sections were semi-open spaces which

allowed the audience to walk freely between the two parts and provided the audience a circular viewing experience.



Figure 5. Liu, Yuan & Feng, Xingyue. *The Divorce*. 2016. Vancouver: Plaza Projects.



Figure 6. Liu, Yuan & Feng, Xingyue. *The Divorce*. 2016. Vancouver: Plaza Projects.

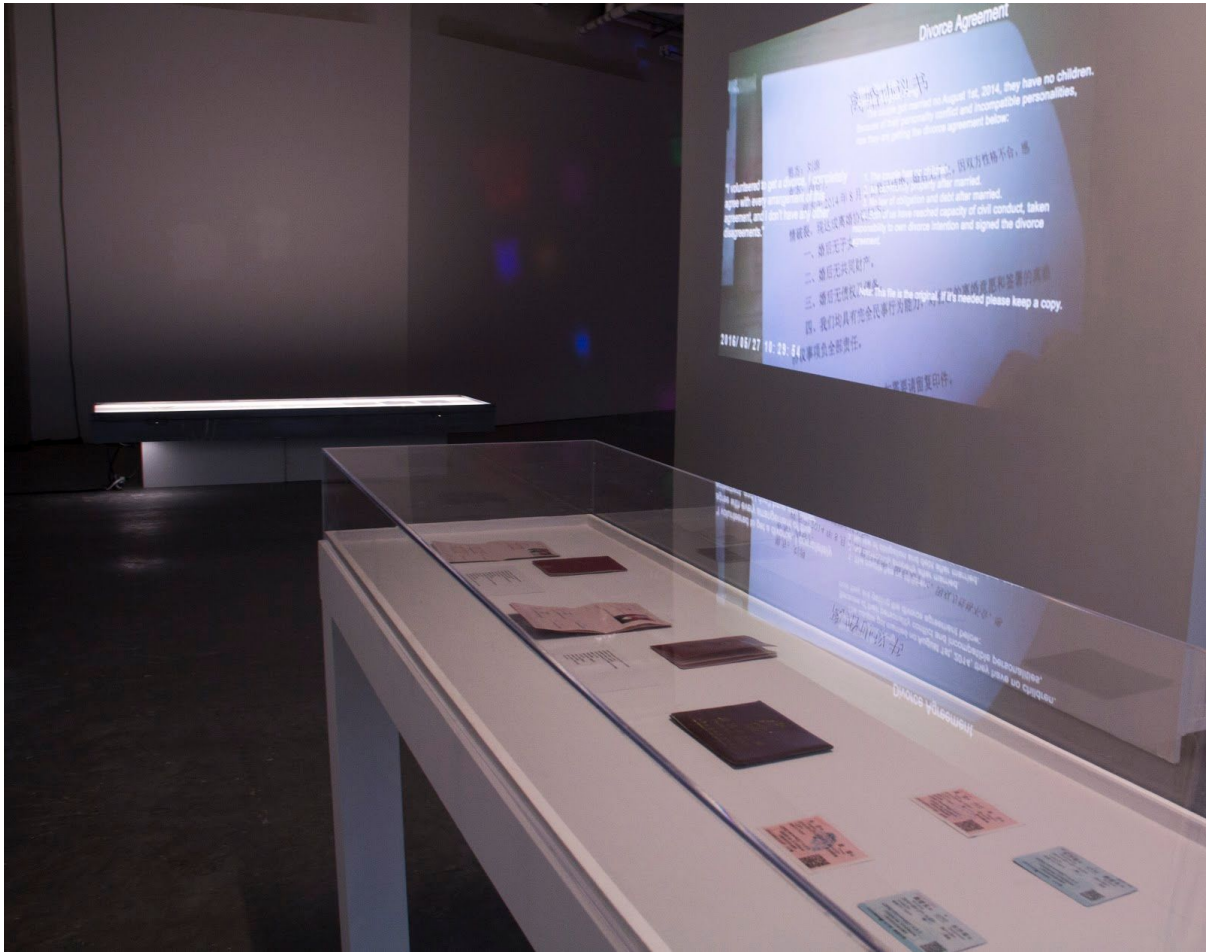


Figure 7. Liu, Yuan & Feng, Xingyue. *The Divorce*. 2016. Vancouver: Plaza Projects.

## Different Voices For Different Plans

### Feng Xingyue

Regarding the exhibition format, my original plan was to re-create a wedding scene that combines both the wedding banquet and the divorce part of the exhibition. After entering through the reception, the audience would see two big screens at the two sides of the stage each playing the wedding film and the divorce video documentation. In the middle of the two screens would be a stage with plinths on top that displays documents such as our annulled wedding certificate, train tickets, divorce papers, and wedding invitations.



Beside the stage would be round wedding banquet tables. The whole space would be decorated with lighting and artificial flowers. This setup would be very different from our actual wedding ceremony. In this plan, the wedding and divorce aspects come face-to-face mirroring each other in the same space, generating a dialogue. The plinths on the stage disclose the entire process of the divorce. Both the wedding invitations and divorce certificates have specific dates to indicate the order of time. When the audience enters to see the divorce video, they might feel curious. Afterward, they could figure out what happened by looking at the documents presented on the stage. This exhibition strategy gives fewer restrictions or manipulations for the audience in seeing the exhibition, granting more openness and possibilities. However, due to the limitations of the exhibition space, I decided to use Yuan's plan.

#### Liu Yuan

The reason for me insisting on dividing the exhibition into two sections is to create two distinctive spaces. The particular order of the two sections provides the audience a contrasting viewing experience. While the audience indulges in the refreshments and watches the wedding film, the happy, joyful, and extravagant wedding environment offers the audience pleasure from experiencing the spectacle of a wedding ceremony. As the audience participates in the process of giving lucky money and watching the wedding film, they are likely to be wishful and give their blessings to the couple. After the audience enters the divorce section, the contrast may induce shock or anger. At the same time, this clean and emotionless space encourages them

to rationalize and rethink their reactions and what they had seen. The divorce video is loaded with information, which helps make sense of the work, and may create an entirely different experience when they return to the wedding section.

### **Personal Voices: After Project**

Feng Xingyue

The work seems to be done, but my parents have no idea that we are divorced. I am still hiding the truth from them. So, I am now living anxiously. To me, the divorce is a release from the conventional Chinese moral restraints, an announcement, and a symbol of breaking from it. But right now I feel I'm not capable enough to convince and change the views of my family members and get them to support my idea. Therefore, I could only choose to have the divorce secretly without their knowledge. Consequently, this project has many potential risks and uncertainties. We could not anticipate what would happen if either of our parents or guests at our wedding found out about the work. They could be furious or feel that they were deceived. We will continually document the follow-up of the project.

Liu Yuan

The *Divorce* project is an important turning point for us. Through this project we gained new insights on life and art. I realized that being transgressive is addictive. The feelings of discontent and the action of fighting toward conventional institutions gave me endless motivations. Marriage brought me

to a new stage of my life. It let me gain new understandings of marriage and other institutions. The divorce may be our opportunity to enter another stage of our lives. Executing this project into an exhibition does not represent its completion. Many factors may impact the project in the future. Our relationship status is one factor to take into consideration. The two of us are still in a relationship, but if we break up in the future, the reading of the work may be subjected to change. This is our life as it is also our art. It will always be an ongoing project as our life goes on. In the meantime, we await new possibilities.



## Work Cited

Russell, Bertrand. *Marriage and Morals*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1929.

Chen Peng. “中国婚姻史稿” [“The History of Marriage in China.”]. 中华书局1990年版

[*Zhonghua Book Company*], (1990): 16.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1994.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Random House. Translated by Robert Hurley, 1978.

Highmore, Ben. *The Everyday Life Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Hsieh, Tehching. *Tehching Hsieh 1986 - 1999*. TEHCHING HSIEH. Web. 2017.

Ifeng. “回顾计划生育政策变化历程” [“The Family Planning Policy and Its Alterations.”]. IFENG, (October 2015): 1-3, 12.

Li, Yinhe. “婚姻终将消亡” [“The Downfall of Marriage.”]. Lecture, 2016.

Li, Yinhe. “李银河自选集” [“Self-selected Works of Li Yinhe.”]. Inner-Mongolian University Press. 2006.

Marks, Kathy. *Tehching Hsieh: the man who didn't go to bed for a year*. The Guardian. April, 2014.

Mencius. *The Works of Mencius*. Dover Publications. November, 2011.

Jackson, Richard., Nakashima, Keisuke. & Howe, Neil. *China's Long March to Retirement Reform*. The Center for Strategic and International Studies. 2009.

Peng, Lin. & Huang, Pumin. “中国思想史参考资料集: 先秦至魏晋南北朝卷”

[“Collection of Reference Material on the History of Chinese thoughts: Chapter on the Pre-Qin Period to Wei,Jin,Northern and Southern Dynasties.”].

Tsinghua University Press. 2005.

Wang, Ling. “中国社会不平等趋势扩大: 1%的家庭占全国三分之一的财产” [“China's Increase in Social Inequality: One Third of the Nation's Wealth in 1% of All Households.”]. Yi Cai, (January 2016).

## Bibliography

- Abramovic, Marina. & Ulay. *The Lovers*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. January, 1989.
- Ai, Weiwei. *Time And Place*. Guangxi Normal University Press. 2010.
- Cabanne, Pierre. *Dialog with Marcel Duchamp*. Translated by Ron Padgett, 1971.
- Chen Peng. “中国婚姻史稿” [“The History of Marriage in China.”]. 中华书局1990年版  
[Zhonghua Book Company], (1990): 16.
- Cutler, Randy Lee. *Open and Wide: Figuring Digestion as Research-Creation*.  
Research-Creation Working Group think tank ed. March, 2014. 1-20. Print.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books. Translated by  
Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Random House. Translated by Robert  
Hurley, 1978.
- Highmore, Ben. *The Everyday Life Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Hsieh, Tehching. *Tehching Hsieh 1986 - 1999*. TEHCHING HSIEH. Web. 2017.
- Ifeng. “回顾计划生育政策变化历程” [“The Family Planning Policy and Its  
Alterations.”]. IFENG, (October 2015): 1-3, 12.
- Jackson, Richard., Nakashima, Keisuke. & Howe, Neil. *China's Long March to  
Retirement Reform*. The Center for Strategic and International Studies. 2009.
- Peng, Lin. & Huang, Pumin. “中国思想史参考资料集: 先秦至魏晋南北朝卷”  
[“Collection of Reference Material on the History of Chinese thoughts: Chapter  
on the Pre-Qin Period to Wei,Jin,Northern and Southern Dynasties.”].  
Tsinghua University Press. 2005.

Kaprow, Allan. *How to Make a Happening*. Primary Information, 2009.

Li Yinhe. “婚姻终将消亡” [“The Downfall of Marriage.”]. Lecture, 2016.

Li Yinhe. “李银河自选集” [“Self-selected Works of Li Yinhe.”]. Inner-Mongolian University Press. 2006.

Marks, Kathy. *Tehching Hsieh: the man who didn't go to bed for a year*. The Guardian. April, 2014.

Mencius. *The Works of Mencius*. Dover Publications. November, 2011.

Russell, Bertrand. *Marriage and Morals*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1929.

Wang Ling. “中国社会不平等趋势扩大: 1%的家庭占全国三分之一的财产” [“China's Increase in Social Inequality: One Third of the Nation's Wealth in 1% of All Households.”]. Yi Cai, (January 2016).